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A brief history of the Netanyahu-Hamas alliance

Adam Raz

14–18 Minuten

Much ink has been spilled describing the longtime relationship – rather, alliance – between Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas. And still, the very fact that there has been close cooperation between the Israeli prime minister (with the support of many on the right) and the fundamentalist organization seemingly evaporated from most of the current analyses – everyone’s talking about “failures,” “mistakes” and “contzeptziot” (fixed conceptions). Given this, there is a need not only to review the history of cooperation but also to conclude unequivocally: The pogrom of October 7, 2023, helps Netanyahu, and not for the first time, to preserve his rule, certainly in the short term.

The MO of [Netanyahu](#)’s policy since his return to the Prime Minister’s Office in 2009 has and continues to be, on the one hand, [bolstering the rule of Hamas in the Gaza Strip](#), and, on the other, weakening the Palestinian Authority.

His return to power was accompanied by a complete turnaround from the policy of his predecessor, Ehud Olmert, who sought to end the conflict through a peace treaty with the most moderate Palestinian leader – PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

For the last 14 years, while implementing a divide-and-conquer

policy vis-a-vis the West Bank and Gaza, “Abu Yair” (“Yair’s father,” in Arabic, as Netanyahu called himself while campaigning in the Arab community before one recent election) has resisted any attempt, military or diplomatic, that might bring an end to the [Hamas regime](#).

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In practice, since the Cast Lead operation in late 2008 and early 2009, during the Olmert era, Hamas’ rule has not faced any genuine military threat. On the contrary: The group has been supported by the Israeli prime minister, and funded with his assistance.

When Netanyahu declared in April 2019, as he has after every other round of fighting, that “we have restored deterrence with Hamas” and that “we have blocked the main supply routes,” he was lying through his teeth.

For over a decade, Netanyahu has lent a hand, in various ways, to the growing military and political power of Hamas. Netanyahu is the one who turned Hamas from a terror organization with few resources into a semi-state body.

Releasing Palestinian prisoners, allowing cash transfers, as the Qatari envoy comes and goes to Gaza as he pleases, agreeing to the import of a broad array of goods, construction materials in particular, with the knowledge that much of the material will be designated for terrorism and not for building civilian infrastructure, increasing the number of work permits in Israel

for Palestinian workers from Gaza, and more. All these developments created symbiosis between the flowering of fundamentalist terrorism and preservation of Netanyahu's rule.

Take note: It would be a mistake to assume that Netanyahu thought about the well-being of the poor and oppressed Gazans – who are also victims of Hamas – when allowing the transfer of funds (some of which, as noted, didn't go to building infrastructure but rather military armament). His goal was to hurt Abbas and prevent division of the Land of Israel into two states.

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It's important to remember that without those funds from Qatar (and Iran), Hamas would not have had the money to maintain its reign of terror, and its regime would have been dependent on restraint.

In practice, the injection of cash (as opposed to bank deposits, which are far more accountable) from Qatar, a practice that Netanyahu supported and approved, has served to strengthen the military arm of Hamas since 2012.

Thus, Netanyahu indirectly funded Hamas after [Abbas decided to stop providing it with funds](#) that he knew would end up being used for terrorism against him, his policies and his people. It's important not to ignore that Hamas used this money to buy the means through which Israelis have been murdered for years.

In parallel, from a security standpoint, since [Operation Protective Edge](#) in 2014, Netanyahu has been guided by a policy that almost completely ignored the terrorism of the

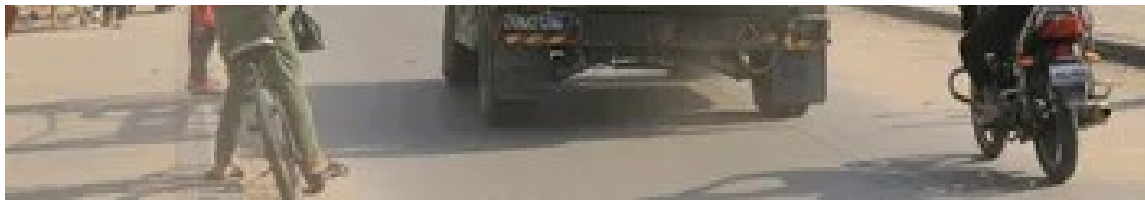
rockets and the incendiary kites and balloons. Occasionally, the media has been exposed to a dog-and-pony show, when such weapons were captured, but not more than that.

It's worth reminding that last year, the ["government of change"](#) (the short-lived coalition led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid) exercised a different policy, one of whose expressions was the halting of funding for Hamas arriving via suitcases full of cash. When Netanyahu tweeted, on May 30, 2022, that "Hamas is interested in the existence of the weak Bennett government," he was lying to the public. The government of change was a disaster for Hamas.

Netanyahu's nightmare was the collapse of the Hamas regime – something that Israel could have expedited, albeit for a difficult price. One of the proofs for this claim was given during Operation Protective Edge.

At the time, Netanyahu leaked to the media the contents of a presentation that the military had made to the security cabinet laying out the potential repercussions of conquering Gaza. The premier knew that the secret document, which noted that occupying Gaza would cost the lives of hundreds of soldiers, would create an atmosphere of opposition to a widespread ground invasion.





Palestinians ride on an Israeli military vehicle taken by Hamas militants during its coordinated attack on October 7, near the Gaza Strip fence. Credit: Abed Abu Reash / AP

In March 2019, Naftali Bennett told the Channel 13 program Hamakor: “Someone took care to leak that to the media to create an excuse for not taking action... it’s one of the gravest leaks in Israeli history.” Of course, the leak was not investigated, despite many demands from members of the Knesset. In closed-door conversations, Benny Gantz said then, when he was the IDF’s chief of staff, “Bibi leaked this.”

Let this sink in. Netanyahu leaked a “top secret” document in order to thwart the military and diplomatic position of the cabinet, which sought to defeat Hamas with various means. We should heed what Avigdor Lieberman told Yedioth Ahronoth, in an interview published just before the [October 7 assault](#), that Netanyahu “continuously thwarted all the targeted assassinations.”

It should be stressed that Netanyahu’s policy of keeping Hamas in charge in Gaza didn’t find expression only through opposition to physical occupation of Gaza and to assassinations of key Hamas players, but also in his determination to thwart any political reconciliation between the PA – Fatah in particular – and Hamas. A prominent example is Netanyahu’s behavior in late 2017, when talks between Fatah and Hamas were actually taking place.

A fundamental disagreement between Abbas and Hamas concerned the question of the Islamist group’s military being

subordinate to to the PA. Hamas agreed that the PA would return to running all civilian matters in Gaza but refused to yield its arms.

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Egypt and the United States supported reconciliation and worked to achieve it. Netanyahu totally opposed the idea, asserting repeatedly that “reconciliation between Hamas and the PLO makes achieving peace harder.” Of course, Netanyahu didn’t pursue peace, which wasn’t on the agenda in any way back then. His position only served Hamas.

Over the years, from time to time, various figures on both sides of the political spectrum repeatedly pointed to the axis of cooperation between Netanyahu and Hamas. On the one hand, for example, Yuval Diskin, head of the Shin Bet security service from 2005 to 2011, told Yedioth Ahronoth in January 2013, “If we look at it over the years, one of the main people contributing to Hamas’s strengthening has been Bibi Netanyahu, since his first term as prime minister.”

In August 2019, former prime minister [Ehud Barak](#) told Army Radio that people who believed that Netanyahu had no strategy were mistaken. “His strategy is to keep Hamas alive and kicking... even at the price of abandoning the citizens [of the south] ... in order to weaken the PA in Ramallah.”

And former IDF chief of staff [Gadi Eisenkot](#) told Maariv in January 2022 that Netanyahu acted “in total opposition to the

national assessment of the National Security Council, which determined that there was a need to disconnect from the Palestinians and establish two states.” Israel moved in the exact opposition direction, weakening the PA and strengthening Hamas.

Shin Bet head Nadav Argaman spoke about this when he finished his term in 2021. He warned explicitly that the lack of dialogue between Israel and the PA had the effect of weakening the latter while bolstering Hamas.

He warned that the relative quiet in the West Bank at the time was deceptive, and that “Israel must find a way to cooperate with the PA and to strengthen it.” Eisenkot commented, in that same 2022 interview, that Argaman was right. “This is what’s happening, and it’s dangerous,” he added.

People on the right said similar things. One of the mantras being repeated was that of newly elected MK [Bezalet Smotrich](#), who in 2015 told the Knesset Channel that “Hamas is an asset and Abu Mazen is a burden,” referring to Abbas by his nom de guerre.

In April 2019, Jonatan Urich, one of Netanyahu’s media advisers and a Likud spokesman, told Makor Rishon that one of Netanyahu’s achievements was separating Gaza (both politically and conceptually) from the West Bank. Netanyahu “basically smashed the vision of the Palestinian state in these two places,” he boasted. “Some of the achievement is related to the Qatari money reaching Hamas each month.”





Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas meets with the Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, Khaled Mashal and the vice Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh in Doha, Qatar on October 28, 2016. Credit: Handout / Palestinian Presidency

Around the same time in 2019, Likud MK [Galit Distel Atbaryan](#) wrote in an effusively complimentary Facebook post: “We must say this honestly – Netanyahu wants Hamas on its feet, and he is ready to pay almost any incomprehensible price for this. Half the country is paralyzed, children and parents are suffering from post-trauma, homes are blown up, people are killed, a street cat holds a nuclear tiger by the balls.” Read it but don’t believe it? It’s worth believing, because this is exactly the policy by which Netanyahu comported himself.

The prime minister himself spoke briefly at times about his position regarding Hamas. In March 2019, he said during a meeting of Likud MKs, at which the subject of transfer of funds to Hamas was under discussion, that, “Whoever opposes a Palestinian state must support delivery of funds to Gaza because maintaining separation between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza will prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.”

In a tweet two months later, Channel 13 quoted former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as telling a Kuwaiti newspaper:

“Netanyahu isn’t interested in a two-state solution. Rather, he wants to separate Gaza from the West Bank, as he told me at the end of 2010.”

Gen. (Res.) Gershon Hachohen, a prominent right winger, made things crystal clear in an interview with the online magazine Mida in May 2019. “When Netanyahu didn’t go to war in Gaza to defeat the Hamas regime, he basically prevented Abu Mazen from establishing a united Palestinian state,” he recalled at the time. “We need to exploit the situation of separation created between Gaza and Ramallah. It’s an Israeli interest of the highest level, and you can’t understand the situation in Gaza without understanding this context.”

Netanyahu’s entire policy since 2009 has sought to destroy any possibility of a diplomatic agreement with the Palestinians. It’s the theme of his rule, which depends on the continuation of the conflict. Destroying democracy is an additional aspect of his continuing rule, something that has brought many of us out to the streets during the past year.

In that same 2019 interview with Army Radio, Barak said that Netanyahu was keeping the south “on a constant low flame.” One should pay particular attention to his assertion that the security establishment laid on the cabinet table several times plans “to drain the swamp” of Hamas in Gaza, but the cabinet never discussed them.

Netanyahu knew, Barak added, “that it’s easier with Hamas to explain to Israelis that there is no one to sit with and no one to talk to. If the PA strengthens... then there will be someone to talk to.”

Back to Distel Atbaryan: “Mark my words – Benjamin Netanyahu keeps Hamas on its feet so that the entire State of Israel won’t

become the ‘Gaza envelope.’” She warned of disaster “if Hamas collapses,” in which case, “Abu Mazen is liable to control Gaza. If he will control it, voices from the left will arise advocating negotiations and a diplomatic settlement and a Palestinian state, including in Judea and Samaria.” Netanyahu’s mouthpieces are incessantly pumping out such messages.

Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas have an unspoken political alliance against their common enemy – the Palestinian Authority. In other words, Netanyahu has cooperation and agreement with a group whose goal is the destruction of the State of Israel and the [murder of Jews](#).

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman was on the mark when he wrote in May 2021, at the time of the establishment of the government of change, that Netanyahu and Hamas were scared of the possibility of a diplomatic breakthrough. He wrote that the premier and Hamas both “wanted to destroy the possibility of political change before it could destroy them politically.”

He then explained that they didn’t need to talk or have an agreement between them. “They each understand what the other needs to stay in power and consciously or unconsciously behave in ways to ensure that they deliver it.”

I could go on and on expanding on the subject of this cooperation, but the preceding examples speak for themselves. The 2023 pogrom is a result of Netanyahu’s policy. It is not “a failure of the concept” – rather, this is the concept: Netanyahu and Hamas are political partners, and both sides have fulfilled their side of the bargain.

In the future, more details will emerge that will shed additional light on that mutual understanding. Don’t make the mistake of

thinking – even now – that as long as Netanyahu and his present government are responsible for making decisions, the Hamas regime will collapse. There will be a lot of talk and pyrotechnics about the current “war against terror,” but sustaining Hamas is more important to Netanyahu than a few [dead kibbutzniks](#).

Adam Raz is a historian, and author, most recently, of “The Demagogue: The Mechanics of Political Power” (in Hebrew).